The role of prosody for the interpretation of rhetorical questions in German

Jana Neitsch, Marianne Kusterer, Nicole Dehé, Bettina Braun, [1]

[1] Department of Linguistics, University of Konstanz, Germany

{Jana.Neitsch, Marianne.Kusterer, Nicole.Dehe, Bettina.Braun}@uni-konstanz.de

Abstract

Questions can be marked as rhetorical by their prosodic realisation as shown for German by Wochner et al. (2015) (see also Neitsch et al. 2017). In two eye-tracking experiments we tested whether *wh*-questions can be interpreted as rhetorical (RQ) or information-seeking (ISQ) based on their prosody. Given the findings of Wochner et al. (2015), we manipulated nuclear pitch accent type (L*+H vs. H+!H*) and voice quality (breathy vs. modal). We also investigated the contribution of the discourse particle *denn*, which has been argued to occur almost obligatorily as a question marker in German (Thurmair, 1991). Participants had to decide whether they heard an RQ or ISQ by clicking on one of two corresponding labels. While Experiment 1 presented listeners with *wh*-questions containing the discourse particle *denn,* Experiment 2 replicated Experiment 1 without the particle. Results showed that a L*+H accent and breathy voice quality typically led to a rhetorical interpretation, while a H+!H* accent with modal voice quality was interpreted as information-seeking. The presence of the particle slightly strengthened these interpretations. Listeners decided faster when presented with L*+H/breathy voice and H+!H*/modal voice compared to the other conditions. Fixation data showed different sensitivity to the prosodic cues depending on the presence of the particle *denn*. In sum, listeners can use accent type and voice quality to interpret *wh*-questions as rhetorical or not, i.e. contextual-linguistic information and other means (e.g. syntactic or lexical) are not strictly necessary.

Neitsch, J., Wochner, D., Zahner, K. and Dehé, N. 2017. Who likes liver? How German speakers use prosody to mark questions as rhetorical. *Phonetics and Phonology in Europe. 12-14 June 2017*, University of Cologne, Germany.

Thurmair, M. 1991. *Zum Gebrauch der Modalpartikel 'denn' in Fragesätzen: Eine korpusbasierte Untersuchung* in E. Klein, F. Pouradier Duteil & K. H. Wagner (eds.), *Betriebslinguistik und Linguistikbetrieb;* Linguistische Arbeiten 260, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 377–388.

Wochner, D., Schlegel, J., Dehé, N., & Braun, B. 2015. The prosodic marking of rhetorical questions in German. Proceedings of INTERSPEECH 2015, 987–991.